MOUNTAIN LIVING

by

Dennis Lubega

Illustrated by Nicholas Kagongo Arinaitwe
When I was a young boy, I always wondered what life was like for people who lived in the mountains, particularly on the Rwenzori Mountains. I wondered whether their children touched and played with the clouds that so often seemed to swallow the mountain into another world. I also had my own dreams of hiking up the side of the mountains and pushing my way through the giant plants that grow on the slopes.

I am now grown-up and employed as a journalist with The Daily Monitor. During many years of reporting I have discovered that one of the best ways to learn about people is to interview them. “Go right to the source,” my mother used to tell me! “Get the information straight from the ‘horse’s mouth!’”

Last weekend I decided to call John Masereka, who is aspiring to become the Member of Parliament representing the Bakonzo community—the group of people living on the Rwenzori Mountains. I bet he would be eager to tell me about his people since he was looking to drum up support for himself for the upcoming elections. I had copied his mobile phone number down a few weeks ago at a seminar I attended about wildlife living in the Rwenzori Mountains.

“Hello, is this John?” I asked when he picked up the phone.
“Yes, this is John Masereka, the people’s man,” he replied. “May I know who’s calling?”

“I’m Dennis. Dennis Lubega. I’m a journalist.”

“Ah, a journalist! With what newspaper?” he inquired.


“Okay, Dennis. How can I be of service to you?” he asked politely.

“Well, I just want to know about your people and the Bakonzo community. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?” I asked confidently, but not knowing what sort of response I would get.

“Dennis, I’m a native of the Rwenzori Mountains and I’d like to assure you that you’re talking to the right person.” He answered with a soft voice that was encouraging and soothing at the same time. “I’m very glad to promote my community to the world through your newspaper. I want everyone to know that I am deeply involved in the daily lives of my people. What would you like to know?”

“Thank you, John.” I changed my voice to become a bit more business-like, although I felt as though I was a child again, dreaming about life on the slopes of a mountain. “To begin with, why are the Bakonzo
referred to as mountain people?”

“Now, that’s an interesting question. People not from the Rwenzoris might have all sorts of answers about this, but the answer is so simple and obvious. The Bakonzo are referred to as mountain people simply because they live on the slopes of the Rwenzori Mountains and its foothills,” explained John.

“Foothills, John? What are foothills?” I asked.

“They’re smaller hills below a group of high mountains,” answered John as if the answer was waiting on the tip of his tongue. His accent was very charming. Listening to him made me think I was speaking with someone from another country and it gave me pleasure to know that Ugandans were so diverse. How interesting!

He continued with enthusiasm, “Did you know that the Rwenzori Mountains make up the highest mountain range in Africa and contain the third highest peak? It is called Magherita. In all of Africa only Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro are higher.”

“I did not know that, but now I do, thanks to you!” I responded, hoping not to sound silly but wanting him to know how much I appreciated his time.

“And what is fascinating about living on such a high mountain range is that our people have to be
strong and hardworking to survive in such a natural setting. We believe that God lives in the mountains and we are committed to respecting all living beings around us,” explained Mr. Masereka. “If we gather firewood from the forest, we must do it sustainably. Being environmentally friendly is part of the way we live.”
“That is fascinating. It seems like you are partners in life with all of the natural treasures around you,” I summarized. “That is a wonderful way to live, in harmony with nature.”

“We all must respect nature if we intend to build our livelihoods so close to it. I wouldn’t want this conversation to continue without telling you about the backbone of our community: our women. Not only are they intelligent and great community leaders, Bakonzo women are extremely hard working!” I could tell he was sincere in his appreciation for Bakonzo women by the proud way he spoke.

“Wow, is that so?” I asked in order to encourage him to tell me more.

“Very much so,” he replied. “They’re excellent mountain climbers and very strong! They can carry a heavy weight using the strength of their necks. For instance, they carry bags to the market by draping a loop of rope around their foreheads and suspending the bags so that they rest on their backs. Sometimes they carry up to 50 kilograms in this manner. What magnificent neck and back muscles they have!”

“I think I’ve seen a number of them in Kampala myself. I would agree with you about their strength and stamina. Even in the capital, they stand out as strong and hard working women,” I added.
“Bingo!” exclaimed the aspiring Member of Parliament excitedly. “You see, Dennis? You’re talking to an honest man who knows his people well! Can I count on you then to spread the word about me? Being a journalist, people will certainly listen to you and you might just be the person to steer me to success!”

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” I laughed. “All the time I suspected that you would eventually drag me towards politics. However, that’s O.K. Already you and I are good friends, aren’t we? I’ll put our little conversation in my report to our news editor and see how we can get more people to know about you.” I really was not as concerned about getting people to know more about John as I was in getting them to know about the Bakonzo people.

There was more that I wanted to know about the Bakonzo community but I could tell by the tone of John’s voice that he didn’t have a lot of time to continue. I quickly went straight to the point that interested me most about people of different cultures
and lifestyles: the food! “You didn’t mention anything about the Bakonzo’s favorite food! If I come to visit, what sort of dish would I find in the Bakonzo homes?”

“That’s interesting you should ask, Dennis,” replied the politician. “First I think it’s important to inform you that the Bakonzo are traditionally cultivators, not pastoralists. We love to plant gardens and eat from the fruit of our labor. One of our favorite food crops is cassava.”

“Really? I love cassava too!” I exclaimed, excited that I knew what he was describing.

“Yes. We make a very tasty dish by pounding dried cassava into a powder and boiling it in water to make a sticky bread called Obundwe. The dish is complete when we pinch off the bread with our hands and eat it with a bean stew.” He continued, “I’d say it’s one of the tastiest dishes I’ve ever eaten and one that you would surely find in a Bakonzo home.”

“Oh, that sounds delicious and it’s great that you eat something so fresh from your own garden. That is living the natural life!” I said admiringly. “You’ve been great John. I’m extremely grateful for your help and information. But I’ll let you go as you must be very busy with the upcoming elections.”
He replied, “It has been my pleasure to chat with you. Why not come visit sometime? You can visit the Rwenzoris and have a real safari adventure in Queen Elizabeth National Park in the same trip! You and I have now become friends and you are welcome anytime.”

“O.K! That’s very kind. Someday I will come visit and I must try the cassava dish when I’m there.” I felt thrilled knowing that I would finally live one of my childhood dreams.

“Good. And please don’t forget to include our little talk in your newspaper,” he reminded me. “While it may seem as though we live on the other side of the world, we’re really not that far from the nation’s capital. All Ugandans should know about us, after all, we are all citizens of this wonderful country!”

“I won’t forget,” I reassured him. “And you are right. Uganda is a wonderful country. I am so proud to be Ugandan, especially after meeting you and knowing more about the Bakonzo people.”

Indeed I would not forget. John seemed like an outstanding Ugandan and a truly proud mountain person. And rightly so, as mountain living seems attractive and thrilling with such interesting people!

THE END
Facts about Bakonzo Community

1. Where do the Bakonzo community traditionally live?
   *In the Rwenzori Mountains and foothills.*

2. What is the traditional dried cassava dish of the Bakonzo people?
   *Obundwe*

3. How do Bakonzo women carry food and goods to market?
   *By draping a loop of rope around their forehead and suspending their basket so that it rests on their back*

4. Are the Bakonzo people traditionally pastoralists or cultivators?
   *Cultivators*
Learning more about nature allows us to understand our environment, respect our wildlife friends, and share our experiences with others.

Be a friend of the natural treasures of Uganda and act responsibly when interacting with your environment.

About the Author

Dennis Patrick Musisi Lubega began his interest in stories at the age of two. Then it was mostly children’s stories on TV and folktales told by his mother. Dennis has never lost this passion. Although he trained in business studies, the forty year-old recently decided to begin a new career as a writer for children and young adults. As a result of this decision, he has written several stories--The First Claim, The Laughing Lion, The Short Giraffe that Wanted a Little Respect, The Monkey Christmas Dinner, and Late on PLE Day, among others. The Natural Treasures of Uganda series of environmental education books is his first set of books to be published. Mr. Lubega lives in Kampala, Uganda, and is married with one child.

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